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The halqa is not just
a space for critical or
intellectual engagement:
above all, it is a space of
encounter that emerges
through an affective
connection between actors
and audiences.

Embodying Halqa: Algerian Storytelling on a Global Stage

Jane E. Goodman

Istijmam, an Algerian theater troupe selected to tour the United States in 2016 by the Center Stage program of the US State Department, sought to recreate for US audiences an experience of halqa, a traditional North African storytelling performance. Algerian playwrights had been experimenting with the halqa since the 1960s, putting it in dialogue with Brechtian styles of acting. Istijmam went further, attempting to recreate an embodied experience of it via a new mise-en-scène and a form of physical theater inspired by Grotowski. Previous analyses have focused on the discursive organization of a halqa-style play, but this article considers the halqa in terms of its mise-en-scène and its embodied materiality. The article links to a US performance of the play on YouTube.

"It was a *halqa*!" Jamil exclaimed. The Istijmam theater troupe had just finished its first dress rehearsal of *Apples* in English for a friendly, invitation-only audience in Oran, Algeria, in preparation for its upcoming tour of the United States under the auspices of the Center Stage program.[1] In the audience were the two translators who had developed the English script, along with a handful of the troupe's English-speaking Algerian friends. With only a week remaining before Istijmam was to leave for the United States, the actors were eager for experience performing in English. Following the run-through, the dozen or so people in attendance gathered on the apartment's terrace overlooking Oran's Mediterranean coastline. Over coffee and pastries, they talked animatedly about the play, the English translation, and the upcoming journey. It was this postperformance discussion that Istijmam's director Jamil Benhamamouch called a halqa.

They aim to "repopulate the halqa, Algeria's town square," the Center Stage promotional materials said about Istijmam's work.[2] "It's a halqa," troupe members proclaimed when they entered the performance space at the University of New Hampshire, where they would be surrounded by spectators on three sides. "That was a halqa," they declared after a postperformance question-and-answer session at New York's La MaMa Experimental Theatre

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Club. And "halqa" was what one actor responded when a spectator said he didn't understand the play's ending.

In North Africa, a halqa is a circle of people who gather around a *goual*,[3] a storyteller who weaves together past and present tales with astute and often humorous commentary. Traditionally, the halqa took place outside the *suq*, the weekly outdoor produce and livestock market.[4] The goual would take up a position on the market's edges, and as he would begin his tale, people would gather around him. He would essentially put on a one-man show, playing every role in his story and moving across different times and places. His tales would speak to ordinary Algerians, who might stop to listen after stocking up on produce for the week. The halqa would reportedly be an animated event, with the crowd becoming involved in the stories, interjecting comments and questions. In today's Algeria, the marketplace halqa has essentially disappeared,[5] but its spirit has been resurrected in contemporary Algerian theater.

The terms *halqa* and *goual* recurred more than any others during Istijmam's tour. They were prominently featured in the publicity of the US State Department's Center Stage program. Offered under the auspices of the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Center Stage brings artists from targeted countries to the United States to promote cultural exchange and enhance mutual understanding. Istijmam was one of five troupes from Algeria and Tanzania selected in 2016.[6] Part of its appeal was the way it drew elements of Algerian marketplace storytelling into its presentations. Halqa and goual were brought up in virtually every interaction that Istijmam had with US audiences. The actors themselves evoked these terms almost every day, both throughout the tour and during the preceding month of rehearsals. Halqa was alternately invoked as a particular quality of reception, as an organization of performance space, as a participatory engagement with a play's interpretation, and as a form of Algerian cultural heritage.

The halqa illuminates different aspects of Istijmam's performance from different angles. Pointing to the past, it is made into heritage: it evokes a North African tradition in a way that revalorizes vernacular performance forms. It offers Algerians evidence of the value of their own theatrical traditions. Halqa-as-heritage has been highly marketable in the United States, and it became a focus of Center Stage's promotional materials for sponsors and audiences. From this perspective, it is invoked as a form of cultural capital, an element of Algerian tradition available for international consumption. It positioned Istijmam and Center Stage in the United States through a lens of cultural value.

Pointing across the Mediterranean, the halqa locates Algerian theater in relation to an avant-garde theatrical literature coming from Europe and the Soviet Union—in particular, the work of Bertolt Brecht on the alienation effect, also called distantiation. Algerian playwrights, including Abdelkader Alloula, the author of *Apples*, took up the halqa as a vernacular artistic form that had been structured through such performance techniques long before

avant-garde theorists had given them a name. As Algerian playwrights saw it, what Brecht began writing about in the 1930s had been part of their halqa for centuries.

Pointing to contemporary performances, Istijmam envisions the halqa as a theatrical encounter that engages the audience via the imagination and the body. It is inspired by the traditional halqa in the absence of a fourth wall between actors and spectators. Instead, as in a marketplace halqa, Istijmam wanted to create a theater in which actors and spectators could coparticipate in shaping the experience and interpretation of the story. One way they sought to experiment with the open-ended, participatory nature of a halqa was via a mis-en-scène that left key moments ambiguous, affording openings for multiple interpretations. As a halqa, a play could hold up a society's concerns, challenges, troubles, and passions in a way that allowed for dialogical engagement, debate, and critical reflection. Finally, as a form of encounter, a halqa, as Istijmam put it into practice, is not only an intellectual or critical exercise, but a material encounter among bodies—those on stage and those in the audience.

Taking up each of these perspectives, I consider how Istijmam both built on and extended earlier uses of halqa and goual in Algerian theater. I begin with a brief history of how the halqa was taken up by twentieth-century Algerian playwrights in relation to the work of Bertolt Brecht and fellow avant-garde theorists. Next, following a synopsis of the play *Apples*, I consider how Istijmam drew on Abdelkader Alloula's work in adopting goual-inspired techniques of voicing, wherein actors move fluidly between indirect third-person narration and direct first-person dialogue. I then develop an extended analysis of the mise-en-scène, arguing that Istijmam put into play techniques of remediation to create *Apples* as a halqa, or an open-ended encounter with audiences. Finally, I turn to the troupe's engagement with the work of Jerzy Grotowski, through which it envisioned the halqa not only as a discursive space of narration, but also as a material or energetic space constituted through the body.

Halqa in Contemporary Algerian Theater

Talking about halqa and goual in contemporary Algerian theater is nothing new. Since the 1960s, Algerian playwrights and directors have been incorporating these figures into their scripts and putting them on stage. In looking to marketplace theater for inspiration, they were part of a postcolonial move to revalorize vernacular traditions. In so doing, they were seeking not to preserve the past, but to use it with "the intention of opening the future" (Fanon 1963:232).[7] In 1962, after 132 years of colonial occupation, Algeria won its independence from France. Seven years later, it hosted the first PanAfrican Festival, launching a continent-wide conversation about how vernacular artistic traditions could contribute to a dynamic postcolonial African future.[8] The halqa and goual, while not specifically featured at the

festival, were similarly celebrated as performance traditions that could be marshalled to new ends.[9]

By seeking inspiration in vernacular cultural forms such as the halqa, artists were in part trying to "decolonize" (Cheniki 2002:41) their culture and restore value to their own heritage. But this was not merely a recovery of heritage for its own sake: it was first and foremost a way of developing a specifically Algerian theater that could speak to contemporary concerns. Throughout much of the twentieth century, most Algerian theater had been based in translations and adaptations of European (and to a lesser degree, Arab) plays.[10] With the halqa, Algerian playwrights and actors could develop their own theatrical vision and voice in a way that put them in dialogue with their own society and with innovative theater coming from abroad. Moreover, taking up the halqa was a way of demonstrating that Algerian theater had something to contribute to conversations about avant-garde theater that were unfolding in Europe among theorists such as Brecht, Meyerhold, Artaud, and their colleagues. Not only was the halqa built around techniques that Brecht was calling distantiation, but these techniques had been in use in vernacular African theater well before theorists like Brecht had come on the scene, thus challenging conventional understandings that avant-garde theatrical techniques could originate only in Europe.

Algerian playwright Ould Abderrahmane Kaki was among the first to connect the performance style of the halqa to what Brecht was calling non-Aristotelian theater—a theater based not on a linear narrative arc, but on fragmented episodes more resonant with the parable, the epic, or, beyond Europe, with Japanese *no* drama, a style of theater that had inspired Brecht.[11] Kaki was the first to adopt the performance organization of the halqa in contemporary theater, arranging the audience in circular form and bringing a goual to the stage (Amine and Carlson 2011:145), but in Kaki's plays, the goual was a narrator, telling the story while others enacted it.[12]

Abdelkader Alloula, author of the play under consideration here, developed and extended these ideas, building the halqa and the goual into the fabric of what he called a "modern halqa theater" (Amine and Carlson 2012:165). Like Kaki, he recognized that the halqa had a non-Aristotelian form. As with the epic, it unfolded in multiple temporalities and locales, presenting a series of tableaux loosely connected around a common theme. It had no stage set, but invited spectators to imagine the show as it was being narrated. The halqa had no distinction between onstage and off: no curtain would go up or down, and costume changes (if they took place at all) would happen in front of the spectators.[13]

Perhaps most importantly, Alloula saw in the halqa performance techniques similar to those that Brecht was calling distantiation, wherein a single actor (the goual) gave voice to a range of characters and mobilized various styles of narration. Whereas in classical European theater, each actor played and identified with a single character, in the halqa, the goual played all the parts but identified with none of them. In the halqa and the goual, Alloula thought, Algerian theater had been doing for centuries what Brecht was

writing about. "I consider Brecht, both his writing and his artistic work, a crucial 'yeast' in my work," Alloula would say. "I almost want to say that he is my spiritual father, or, better, my friend and my faithful fellow traveler" (cited in Djellid 1997:23). Algerian theater expert Lakhdar Mansouri reiterated these points to me when we spoke in 2016: "The goual in the traditional halqa was Brechtian: he broke the fourth wall, spoke directly to spectators, incited them to participation in the action [of the play]: it's the same thing that Brecht brought to his theater."[14]

In Kaki's halqa-style plays, the goual had stood to the side, narrating and commenting on what the characters were doing, but not entering into the action. In contrast, Alloula reenvisioned the goual as standing simultaneously within and outside the characters she plays.[15] As a goual, sometimes the actor would speak about the characters in the story in the third person; other times, she would enact the character, voicing their words in the first person.[16] That is, the actor moves between talking about and entering into the characters in the story. Because she constantly shifts roles and perspectives, the actor can never be fully identified with any one character or voice.[17] She can never embody a single perspective the way a traditional actor playing a character would do. Instead, she moves into and out of different roles by changing her stance, voice, and body language. In the same play, then, an actor-as-goual can be narrator, protagonist, and supporting cast.

Yet for Alloula, the play-as-halqa was of interest not only because it contained Brechtian elements. It was also a performance form that could speak to ordinary Algerians, just as the traditional halqa did. It could portray people and experiences that average folks could relate to, holding them up in a comic but critical light. For Alloula, it offered a suggestive template for the work that contemporary Algerian theater could accomplish. His plays used irony, irreverence, and humor to depict the small injustices of daily life, the foibles of petty bureaucrats, and the comical microencounters with the unwieldy administration that Algerians faced every day. In repositioning the halqa as contemporary theater, he was most interested in its potential for portraying the small daily dramas that everyday Algerians lived, holding them up as sites for entertainment and critical reflection.

Alloula's play *Apples*, which Istijmam brought to the United States, stages several of these small dramas. The play begins and ends in a public restroom. It centers on the stories of two clients. The first is called simply the Customer. He sets out on a quest to find an apple to satisfy his pregnant wife's cravings. Apples were a luxury product in Algeria, when they could be found at all, and they were utterly inaccessible to someone of his socioeconomic status. But his wife is sure she can smell them, so he sets out to follow the smell. It leads him to a grocer who has the shiny red fruits out—but for display only, not for sale. As the Customer searches the city for apples, he discovers that the factory where he long worked has been torn down overnight. Seeking justice, he complains to the courts, seeks an audience with the attorney general, tells his story to a policeman. But he gets nowhere. So he stumbles into the restroom desperate for release. He begs the Attendant to

let him scream, holler, stomp his feet, and release the pain. The Attendant, a former labor union representative, is initially resistant: release of that nature is not part of the house rules. But after hearing the Customer's anguished stories, he is won over, and he sends the Customer into a stall where he can let loose to his heart's content.

As the Customer is releasing his pain, a second client enters the restroom, dressed in a Roman toga. He turns out to be an actor in the state theater, but he was marginalized, given meaningless bit parts like playing a closet and saying "zeet, zeet" as his door (made by his arms) was opened. Seeking a place to pursue his own creative projects, he is entranced by the restroom's acoustics and bursts into a vocal exercise. Then he starts to recite Brutus's famous speech to the Romans after Julius Caesar's assassination: "Had you rather Caesar were living and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?" He goes on to sketch the kind of play he would like to put on, a play that gives such a spot-on critique of the corrupt nature of power that the Attendant fears for his own job. But despite his initial reservations, the Attendant ends up being drawn into his clients' stories. At the play's end, he comes up with a vision for their collective futures: they will work together to make the restroom an entrepreneurial space by offering a cultural experience—music and theater—alongside its more visceral function. "Let's get to work," he exhorts them. "Customers will be coming in soon."

Redeveloping Halqa: Voicing, Bodies, Mise-en-Scène

In performances of *Apples*, Istijmam took up Alloula's mantle, using techniques of voicing to create a sense of halqa while engaging with the halqa in novel ways. Whereas Alloula was inspired primarily by the discursive style of the goual, Istijmam saw the halqa itself as what I would call an energetic field, generated through an embodied connection between actors and audiences. The actors saw in the halqa an organization of material intensities or energies, akin to what Portuguese choreographer Vera Mantero has described as a "string connecting us to them, a string that we keep on pulling and stretching" (Pais 2017:233). In this sense, for Istijmam, a halqa was a haptic engagement, based in an "immediacy of perceptual experience" (Pais 2017:236). As an organization of material intensities or energies, its halqa draws as much on its work with the physical theater of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski as Alloula's halqa had drawn on Brecht. Istijmam sought to draw spectators into the play as a space of potentiality and emergence, like the halqa, inviting audiences to engage with the play as active cocreators. It did so through a mise-en-scène that was ambiguous, fostering a range of interpretive possibilities.

In what follows, I take up several ways that Istijmam sought to stage *Apples* as a halqa. I begin by looking at the goual in terms of the Brechtian techniques of voicing that Alloula employed and that Istijmam adopted.

Here, the focus is on the discursive and dialogical components of the halqa. I then take an extended look at staging techniques, comparing Istijmam's mise-en-scène for *Apples* with the way it had staged the play in Arabic (as *Et-Teffeh*). The troupe, for its North African tour of *Et-Teffeh* from 2009 to 2011, had framed the play in relation to traditional marketplace performances but incorporated the contemporary news media in an improvisatory moment. For the US tour of *Apples* in 2016, it framed the play through radio and dreams. By envisioning the mise-en-scène as a way of building a halqa, it was seeking to open a space for audiences to coconstitute the play's interpretation, just as it imagined marketgoers would have done. I conclude by locating Istijmam's halqa as an energetic space, examining how the troupe drew on Grotowski's rigorous actor-training exercises to recreate the halqa as a space of affective engagement and embodied flow.

Voicing Halqa

A halqa entails particular techniques of voicing that are enacted by the goual. On a contemporary stage, a goual has been cast in two ways. The more conventional way is to treat the goual as a traditional narrator, who stands on the side of the stage, recounting and commenting on what the characters on stage are doing, but not entering into the action. In the marketplace halqa itself, however, the goual simultaneously narrates and enacts the story. Alloula took up the goual in this form, casting the actor as a goual who stood both within and outside the characters she plays. As a goual, sometimes the actor speaks about the story's characters in the third person; other times, she enacts characters, voicing their words in the first person and creating the story as an emergent event.[18] That is, the actor moves between talking about and entering into the characters in the story. Because she constantly shifts roles and perspectives, she can never be fully identified with any one character or voice. She can never embody a single perspective the way a traditional actor playing a character would do. Instead, she shifts into and out of different roles by changing her stance, voice, and body language.[19] In the same play, then, an actor-as-goual can be narrator, protagonist, and supporting cast. As longtime Alloula collaborator Mourad Senouci put it, an Alloula play does not need a separate goual because "the goual is present in the actors."[20] Through a creative play of voicing, each actor moves into and out of different characters, roles, and stances. When an actor enters into a character, she momentarily inhabits that character's position, creating a temporary identification, only to move away as she enacts another character or provides narration. As Jamil put it:

> Distantiation allows an actor to do what a classical actor can't do. A classical actor can't directly look at or speak to the public. The goual can.... So there is distantiation [from his role] in that the goual can speak to the public, but there

> is also an identification with his role, which he creates. . . . It's not distantiation *or* identification, it's distantiation *and* identification.[21]

Istijmam's performance of *Apples* offers any number of examples of this goual-style play of voicing. For instance, Rihab Alloula, lead actor with the troupe (and playwright's daughter) both tells the story of the Customer (her primary role) and speaks as the Customer. She narrates the Customer's encounter with supporting characters, such as the Policeman, and enacts both the Customer and the Policeman. As the Policeman, she changes her stance, speaking more deeply, putting her hands in her pockets, raising her collar, and thrusting her pelvis forward. She speaks about and gives voice to a neighbor, who chews out the Customer when he asks for the price of an apple, to an old man despondent at the surge in prices, and even to the Customer's own daughter. By telling the story while acting it out from each character's perspective, Rihab is performing on stage the way a goual would have performed in the marketplace halqa. In Brechtian terms, Rihab as goual operates from a stance of distantiation, entering into every character, finding points of identification, but then moving back into another voice.

Moving between third-person narration and first-person experience can open up a space of critical distance: a space where the actor can stand outside the particular character she is portraying and comment on what that character is saying. For instance, in a court scene, Rihab acts as the official who is showing her fellow actor, Mustapha Lakhdari (here, moving out of his primary role of Attendant), a family of twelve living under the stairs. She describes how the family was evicted from its home by the courts, and adds, almost as an aside, "the very same courts that got them evicted." Whose voice is this? Not the Customer's. Not the court official's. Not the Policeman's. The line resonates beyond the playwright, the actor, and the particular characters; it invites actors and audience to experience a moment of complicity as they recognize the petty paradox that the scene describes. They know in their bones about the capricious and arbitrary encounters with power where the little guy just trying to get by is caught up in endless procedural webs from which he cannot escape. The line constitutes a third voice, a voice of social critique, which could perhaps be experienced as shared precisely because it stands apart, outside the story, unidentified with a single character's perspective. Here, the goual is not only a narrator and animator of stories, but also a figure capable of opening up a space for critical reflection and commentary.

Another moment of collective recognition occurred in the United States in 2016, around a line the Attendant utters about the "red Russian demon." The Actor (played by Istijmam's third actor, Moussa Boukraa) had been quoting lines from Julius Caesar, but the Attendant had no idea what the Actor was talking about. Shakespeare was entirely beyond his experience. He looked askance at the Actor, and then diagnosed his problem: "Democracy drove you crazy!" This line itself generally provoked a laugh.

Ever the entrepreneur, the Attendant had a solution for the Actor's over-the-top verbiage: the Actor should go find Si Mbarek, an African healer, who could "cauterize your legs, exorcise you and release the demon who is making you talk this way." The Actor tried to explain that he was simply reciting a passage from a Shakespearean play, but the Attendant would have none of it: "Si Mbarek will exorcise it from you, even if it is a *red Russian demon*." US audiences often laughed at this moment. The line worked here to open a space for collective recognition of an issue that was just coming to light, two months before the 2016 election.

Voicing, then, is one of the primary techniques that Alloula and Istijmam used to create a sense of halqa. Another way that Istijmam sought to generate the sense of audience engagement that a halqa would foster was through the staging, the mise-en-scène.

Staging Halqa: Mise-en-Scène

Istijmam staged *Et-Teffeh* and *Apples* differently. Although the actors did not change the script (aside from changes that took place in translation, discussed in Goodman 2017 and Goodman under review), they changed key aspects of the mise-en-scène. In both versions, they were trying to create a halqa as a space that would spark audience engagement and coparticipation, but through distinct framing devices, such that audience interpretation would be utterly different.

In North African performances, Istijmam staged *Et-Teffeh* as one of several marketplace performances.[22] The play followed a short musical and poetic performance by two of the actors, Moussa and Rihab. As they were exiting the stage, a third actor (Mustapha), entered carrying the play's only prop, a cube. The two groups of performers stopped on stage and greeted each other. Rihab and Moussa then left the stage, leaving Mustapha alone. He began *Et-Teffeh,* posing the cube (which represented a toilet, among other things) and starting to clean the floor. As he was cleaning, he hummed a popular Algerian rai song[23] about love and danced a bit. The audience, apparently amused, clapped along. Then the Customer (Rihab) entered and the story began.

As Lila Tahar Amar, Istijmam's administrator, later explained to me, this opening was intended to suggest the form of a halqa by featuring multiple performances. In the market, a storyteller might be followed by a snake charmer, a group of musicians, a poet, a fire-swallower, an acrobat, or other acts. Such performances might go on for hours, one after the next. When the troupe adopted this format, it fostered an experience of distantiation: the actors were playing at being marketplace actors. The greeting was intended to be interpreted as an offstage encounter, highlighting the space in between performances, the moment when one group left the stage and another took it. This greeting, as a phatic performance, foregrounded their connection as actors who recognized each other outside their performance roles. In other

words, the actors performed the transition itself between two marketplace performances—a Brechtian move.

At the end of *Et-Teffeh*, the Actor and the Customer encountered each other in the public toilet for the first time. Following the script, the Attendant introduced them to each other with these words: "That man is an actor; he will work with us in the business. This man will tell you his story of apples later." In the Arabic version, at this point the Attendant continued to recite the script, but introduced a change in the mise-en-scène: he pretended to turn on a microphone and spoke the next lines in a different voice, taking on the tone and the speaking style of the Algerian president: "We have to structure this business and establish professional relationships, rights, and duties, and think about how to improve our services and profitability." Rihab at this point stepped out of her main role as the Customer and entered into the role of a video journalist who was filming the speech. The three then went back into their primary roles, coming together around their shared plan for a collective future. They all sang the song the Attendant had opened with, and they all exited together, the Customer carrying the cube, and the other two making as if to clean the floor.

The English language version, *Apples,* was framed differently. First, there was no prior performance. The Attendant entered alone, carrying the cube. As in the Arabic version, he started cleaning the floor, but he then walked to the side of the stage and pressed an imaginary button on an imaginary wall. A sound of static came in from offstage, made by the voices of the other two actors. He turned his hand as if trying to find a station. From offstage, a voice (Rihab's) started singing, in English, the first strains of "Killing Me Softly," a song made highly popular in Algeria by the Fugees. US audiences would almost always laugh at this point, surprised that an Algerian play was beginning with a song so familiar to them. The Attendant turned the dial again, landing on a station where a deep voice uttered "Respect the law" (also delivered by Rihab, foreshadowing the lines of a police officer whom she would enact later in the play). Startled, the Attendant turned the dial a third time and landed on a station playing a traditional Algerian rai song—the same one that had begun the Arabic version, except that this time it was sung not by the Attendant, but by Rihab and Moussa, still offstage. Satisfied, the Attendant began to sing along as he went back to cleaning the floor. The play then unfolded more or less as does the Arabic version, until the end. In the Arabic version, the three characters—Attendant, Customer, Actor—finished onstage together, seemingly united in their collective project to recreate the restroom as a space where cultural entertainment would be added to its offerings. In the English version, the Actor exited, then the Customer, leaving the Attendant alone onstage. He sat down on the cube/toilet to rest, happily dreaming of his future, almost nodding off, but was startled out of his reverie when the radio (again created vocally by Rihab and Moussa backstage) came back on, playing the same Algerian rai tune he had sung along with at the beginning.

He jumped up in a daze, moved to turn off the radio, and then stumbled offstage, appearing stunned and confused.

These opening and closing scenes, the play's frame, raise a number of issues. Both of them introduce other media into the play, creating scenes based around remediation, or the representation of one medium within another.[24] In the Arabic version, the moment of remediation comes at the end, via the microphone and the camera. The imaginary microphone and video camera momentarily transform Mustapha from Attendant into the President in a Brechtian move of distantiation. In this case, it introduces a fleeting instance of humorous critique, but it does not otherwise transform the interpretation of the play.

In the English version, a representation of the radio was added to the beginning and ending of the play. As a framing device, it changed the way the actors themselves understood the play, and it created a significantly different set of interpretive possibilities for audiences. The transformation of the mise-en-scène was gradual. Jamil said that it had just come to him as an idea to try out, so he introduced it one day in rehearsal. Initially, the Attendant's use of the radio was meant to suggest that the whole play was a dream sequence. At the beginning of the play, he would turn the radio on, sit down on the cube, sway his head to the music, and then appear to nod off. At the play's end, he would again sit down on the cube, appear to be asleep, but then awaken with a start to the sound of the radio, which would be playing the same song he had fallen asleep to. He would awake in a state of postdream confusion, the state where we ask: Was that real? What just happened?

Seeing this version in rehearsal raised new interpretative possibilities for me. Taking the play for a dream, with its nonlinear, fragmented construction, made sense: as in a dream, one scene morphs into the next, without resolution. In a dream, one looks for a different kind of coherence: not a continuous narrative, which builds from one scene to the next, but a loose sense of how the fragments connect, or fail to connect. The absurdist moments, particularly in the Actor's scene, started making more sense. The play began to suggest elements of a social reality where desire, neoliberal transformation, and art continuously bleed into each other.[25]

But then Jamil altered the ending again. He no longer had the Attendant (Mustapha) nod off at the end. Instead, Mustapha would suddenly hear the music, appear startled and even a bit panicked, turn it off—and then stumble off the stage, spinning around, dizzy, disoriented. But there was no moment of awakening from sleep. For some audience members, the radio at the beginning and ending still suggested a dream sequence, even without the scene of awakening, but for others, it did not. During the tour, the ending proved to be one of the most confounding elements of the play. In talkbacks after the shows, the question came up almost every time: what happened at the end? In the spirit of halqa, I offer some of these conversations, highlighting the way the actors want to foreground the halqa as a space of interpretation.

At Indiana University
Audience member: I didn't get the last scene when the Attendant got so distracted. I'm wondering why he got distracted and what distracted him.

Mustapha: *Maybe* we can say it's like I woke up from a dream, it's like the first time I listened. I sleep, so *maybe* it was a dream; another time this song, I wake up, … *maybe* I'm a crazy man.

Audience member: So *maybe* it all happened, and maybe it didn't?

Mustapha**:** *Maybe* dream, or people can understand, his life, his imagination.

At La MaMa in New York
Audience member: What was the significance of the song at the end that pushed the Attendant out?

Rihab: The song is a popular song, a rai song, rai is very popular in Algeria. And he was, in fact—he was listening at the beginning to this song, and he loved this song, and it makes him traveling or dreaming or sleeping—*we don't know*, and at the end we find the same situation of dreaming, of relaxing.

Lila: *Al halqa*

Rihab: Yes, and when the Restroom Attendant woke up, it was just a little imagination or *perhaps* it was real; it is *open, open to the imagination of everyone, even us.* [Laughter.]

Mustapha**:** Me too, *I don't know.* [Laughter.]

Rihab: No, you must know (joking)! [Laughter.]

At the University of New Hampshire
Audience member: What was the ending, where you like have a panic attack?

Lila: What did you understand?

Audience member: Umm [audience laughter]. . . . I don't know. Maybe he had a realization about the world, or something. I asked the question because I was confused.

Jamil: Even us, we don't know. In this kind of theater, the imagination of the spectator is open, and each one's interpretation is different. For us, that is the objective.

Istijmam's responses to these questions are replete with adverbs of indeterminacy, like "maybe" and "perhaps," and even by statements like "we don't know." As moderator of the talkback sessions, I was initially frustrated by these responses. For instance, in the interaction at the University of New Hampshire, I could sense that the audience member was unsatisfied

by being told to use his imagination. He wanted more to work with. After Jamil's reply, I interjected, saying that a dream sequence was one way to interpret the ending. We discussed it later in the troupe. Istijmam wanted to leave it ambiguous, letting the spectators ask themselves the question: what just happened? The actors did not want to orient them toward a singular interpretation. In Istijmam's view, the ambiguity of the ending opened up the space they called halqa. The mise-en-scène would be successful if it led the spectators to reflect on what had happened.

In both the Arabic and the English versions, the actors sought to create a space of indeterminacy, in part through the technique of remediation. That is, the medium of theater created on stage a representation of another form of media, one that worked momentarily to lift spectators outside the play itself. In the Arabic version, a journalist with a video camera and a microphone suddenly entered the play, unexpectedly turning the scene into an encounter with the media. In the English version, a radio opened and closed the play, suggesting alternative ways of interpreting the play's stories. In both cases, the introduction of another medium—camera, radio—worked to create distantiation: that is, to create a space where spectators might be pulled out of the main story and start asking themselves questions like the ones above. These fleeting but critical moments generated a space for reflection, when spectators could stand back from the story and see it *as a story* being presented through the lens of another medium. Remediation, in other words, helped create the space of halqa by turning the play itself into a remediated story, opening new interpretive possibilities for the audience. This space of remediation was a key part of how Istijmam envisioned a halqa.

Not all audiences were convinced that they had experienced a halqa. A spectator at the La MaMa performance was getting at this when she asked:

> When you play outside in Algeria, is the audience—participation of the audience—a little different than what you encountered tonight? We didn't sing with you; we didn't cross into the stage in order to dance with you. Is the audience reaction in the Maghreb more physically participating than we did tonight?

This question was echoed in other talkbacks. Even when Istijmam performed on a thrust stage (as at UNH and IU), surrounded by the audience on three sides, *Apples* was still a structured, formal performance. People would get a ticket, enter, and take a seat, the lights would go down, and the play would begin. From this perspective, the audience was seeing the performance from within the embodied decorum imposed by a long history of Western performance practice. What might a halqa mean in that context? Consider Jamil's reply:

> We think that when there's an actor and a spectator, there's theater. We don't need [a certain kind of] space to do theater.

> In our experience in Istijmam, it's about going to meet the public (*aller à la rencontre du publique*). In North Africa, we played outside in the street, and also in theaters. But what we are looking for, it's the participation of the spectator in the play; the space doesn't matter."

A play, in other words, was an encounter. The audience member was right, in that spectators were not reshaping the direction of *Apples*. They were not shouting out responses to the actors the way people might in a halqa. *Apples* was not an improvisatory piece, whose script changed each time. But Jamil seems to have been getting at something else: a play as a shared encounter with the audience that can perhaps best be characterized as an energy exchange.

Halqa Meets Grotowski

If Jamil were reading over my shoulder, he would be telling me that the halqa is not just a space for critical or intellectual engagement, that creating a halqa is not a theoretical exercise. It is not only a result of mise-en-scène, although the mise-en-scène can help furnish the conditions for a performance to become a halqa. Above all, it is a space of encounter that emerges through an affective connection between actors and audiences. Affect, following Brian Massumi (2002), refers here not to emotion, but to the sensations generated by and in human bodies through vibration, resonance, volume, frequency, and related material forces. An affective encounter is also performative: it "does something … to the bodies and to the sensitive qualities we experience in a live performance" (Pais 2017:244). Jamil could sense whether this encounter was developing, he said, from backstage, where he usually listened to Istijmam's performances. In standing backstage attuned to the energy of the room, he was "listening with the whole body to the reverberations of the rhythms and intensities of performance" (Pais 2017:236). By so doing, he was engaged in an affective encounter with the play. A halqa, from this perspective, is precisely such an encounter.

A halqa is first and foremost a gathering of bodies in a performance space. Whether it is in the market, the street, or a formal theater, it is envisioned by Istijmam as a space of commotion or "co-motion" (Pais 2017:242). As material bodies, we are "open beings who receive signals from and emit signals to others and to the environment, perceived by the senses and materialized in our physiology" (Pais 2017:240–41). Physical theater like that practiced by Istijmam puts into play rhythms and vibrations that viscerally impact the audience. As spectators are drawn in, they intensify the performance, turning it into an energetic exchange, one that Pais, citing the actor Tony Torn, likens to an ocean: "The energy flows off the stage into the audience, it recycles and comes surging back.… You feel like there is this give and take, a suction and then a wave" (Torn, cited in Pais 2017:247). This

flow is experienced as surges of affect that are collectively generated between actors and audiences. Spectators' interpretations may differ, but affective intensities result from a shared sensory experience and prompt spectators to groan, gasp, or laugh together. Said differently, the audience can feel the embodiment of the actor through "immersed sensuous participation" (Mazzarella 2017:204). Experiencing a play as a sensory performance of affective intensity is why some of my friends and family members could tell me that they enjoyed seeing *Apples* even though they did not understand it.

For Jamil, a halqa had a magic to it that was as sweet as a jasmine flower: "There is something that emerges between you and the public. We can call it magic." Addressing the actors after the first invited presentation of *Apples* in Oran, he had this to say: theater was 70 percent in the text and mise-en-scène, but the remaining 30 percent was in the play (*le jeu*), the energy or affect generated on stage among actors and spectators. "Why think that everything is on you," he remarked, "that you have to do this, do that, not do this, that if I don't do this, everything will stop. No! You need to be conscious of these things; we have a text, we have a mise-en-scène. The rest, it's the night jasmine (*mesk al-layl*)."

From a related perspective, a halqa can be understood as a material architecture that works through *tensegrity*. This term, coined by the American engineer Buckminster Fuller to describe the principle through which geodesic domes are held aloft, was taken up by Ana Pais to characterize the energy of performance (2017:245; she uses the alternative spelling, *tensigrity*). Through tensegrity, loads are borne not through compression but through tension; in other words, weight is passed not directly from one component to another but instead is distributed through a network of cables that run between the load-bearing components while ensuring that they never touch. The halqa as Istijmam talked about it was like such a dome, created and sustained through a continuous give and take of energy located not in the performers or in the audience, but in the space generated between them. To generate a performance experience of tensegrity, the actors had to maximize their own bodies' capacity for *biotensegrity,* a concept based on the insight that our bodies operate through the same principle that geodesic domes do: "forces primarily flow through our muscles and fascial structures and not in a continuous compression manner through our bones. In fact, our bones do not directly touch each other, and are actually 'floating' in the tension structure created by our fascial network."[26]

Grotowski training was the means through which Rihab, Mustapha, and Moussa sought to develop their own bodies as organizations of biotensegrity, though they did not use or have access to that language. While not based explicitly in principles of biotensegrity, the Grotowski method works in the same corporal range that biotensegrity training demands, where participants push their bodies past their ordinary capabilities. The training was so critical to Istijmam that they could not imagine performing without it. I observed them when they began the training in 2009: they would spend hours trying to leap over large stacks of cushions, jump up on an unsecured chair landing

on one foot, and move fluidly into splits, backbends, and headstands. The training led to many black-and-blue bruises and some injuries, and almost fragmented the group, but in the end it became central to Istijmam's theatrical work. During the rehearsal residency, these actors devoted an hour each day to the training. In the United States, Grotowski exercises were a scheduled part of every engagement.

Finally, Istijmam's focus on the embodied connection with the audience articulates with and was inspired by the "poor theater" approach pioneered by Grotowski, who said that whereas

> theater can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects … it cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion.... Text per se is not theatre.... It becomes theater only through the actors' use of it. ([1968] 2002:3)

In all kinds of theater, of course, actors use their bodies to translate a theatrical text into an experience for an audience.[27] But in poor theater, the actors generate the stage, the set, and the story through their bodies. The bodies themselves create the mise-en-scène—another reason that embodied expression was so vital to Istijmam.

Conclusion

On a basic level, the halqa and the goual constitute cultural capital, making Algerian heritage and history appealing to contemporary audiences. From this perspective, they were invoked on the US tour primarily as figures of difference, providing a language to talk about a specifically Algerian form of theatrical practice. On another level, they were made into figures of similarity, providing a comparative language that put Algerian theater in dialogue with other theatrical traditions, in particular, the works of Bertolt Brecht. From this perspective, drawing on the halqa and the goual gave Istijmam a way to simultaneously ground their performance in their own tradition while launching it into larger conversations.

At the same time, these figures were invoked in ways that transcended cultural difference altogether. For Istijmam, the halqa and goual modeled a kind of theatrical encounter that was experienced on an energetic, affective level. One spectator, at the talkback after the Indiana University performance, was perhaps getting at this in speaking not only of "other worlds," but also of "humanity":

> *Merci beaucoup*, you are marvelous, *magnifique*, *merci beaucoup*, you are fabulous. I'm an American actor. You were able to transform this theater into not only a picture of humanity with each line, each thing you said, each movement of your

> body, but you also created for us just with your face, your eyes, your hands, so many other worlds and so much humanity that I say *merci beaucoup*.

Her words were greeted with applause, a fitting end to that night's halqa.

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NOTES

1. I invite readers to watch the play I am discussing in this article at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qil7osS76GY.
2. https://centerstageus.org/artists/istijmam.
3. The word *goual* derives from the Arabic verb *qaala* 'to speak'.
4. On the Moroccan market as a space of performance, see Kapchan 1996. On the halqa in Morocco, see Amine and Carlson 2012, chapter 3, and Kapchan 1995.
5. Halqa-style performances continue to exist as tourist attractions at large markets such as Morocco's Djema'a El Fna. See Ladenburger 2010.
6. For more on Center Stage and the tour, see https://centerstageus.org/artists/istijmam.
7. Fanon was writing against what he saw as a problem with Négritude, a movement that he characterized as valorizing tradition for its own sake in ways that relegated it to the past and were counterproductive to revolution. See his essay "On National Culture," delivered at the Second Congress of Black Artists and Writers, held at Rome in 1959, translated and reproduced in Fanon 1963.
8. The PanAfrican Festival featured five talks on theater and postcoloniality, collected in *La Culture Africaine: Le Symposium d'Alger, 21 Juillet–1er Aout 1969* (Algiers: Société Nationale d'Edition et de Distribution).

9. Many anthropological works have studied contemporary reappropriations of tradition. For studies based in Africa, see especially Goodman 2005; Kapchan 2007; Shipley 2015.
10. Cheniki 2002 provides an overview of the adaptation of European and Arab plays in twentieth-century Algeria.
11. Other Algerian playwrights to draw significantly on Brechtian techniques include Kateb Yacine and Slimane Benaïssa, whose work Amine and Carlson (2012) discuss. On Algerian theater, see also Cheniki 2002, 2006. On Kaki, see Mostefa and Benchehida 2006.
12. Mostefa and Benchehida (2006) discuss major influences on Kaki and provide French translations of excerpts of several of his plays and novels. Cheurfi provides a biography of Kaki (2007:653–54). Cheniki discusses Kaki's career in the larger context of Algerian theater (Cheniki 2002).
13. Reportedly, the actor could even sit down for a time among the spectators and smoke a cigarette (Alloula 1997:128).
14. Lakhdar Mansouri, personal interview, August 16, 2016.
15. I am grateful to Rihab Alloula for this clarification. Personal communication by email, April 23, 2018.
16. In more formal terms, he would alternate between indirect and direct forms of reported speech.
17. In shifting from third-person narration to first-person speech, the actor—as goual—is not in a simple dyadic relationship between herself and the characters she plays. That is, she does not just project herself into another self. In conventional theatrical productions, the audience understands that when the actor says "I," it is the "I" of the character, not the actor; in other words, the audience understands that the actor is using a "theatrical 'I'" (Urban 1989). Greg Urban puts it this way: "The use of the theatrical 'I' involves a complicated sign process in which a speaker/narrator becomes in effect the substitutive ostensive referent of a third person form, and consequently capable of referring to that referent by means of the first person form" (Urban 1989:41).
18. In more formal terms, he would alternate between indirect and direct forms of reported speech.
19. On shifts of voicing and stance, also known as footing, see especially Agha 2005; Goffman 1979; Goodman, Tomlinson, and Richland 2014; Hastings and Manning 2004.
20. Mourad Senouci, personal interview, August 15, 2016, Oran, Algeria.
21. Jamil Benhamamouch, personal interview, September 1, 2016, Oran, Algeria.
22. My reference for the North African staging is a performance from May 5, 2010, in the Salle Mougar in Algiers, which Istijmam provided to me as a video. That performance was sponsored by the Algerian Office Nationale de la Culture et de l'Information.
23. The song is "Lazrag se'ani" by Algerian rai singer Cheb Mami.
24. On remediation, see Bolter and Grusin 1999; on intermediality, see Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006.
25. These themes are further discussed in Goodman under review.
26. http://www.magicalrobot.org/BeingHuman/2010/04/introduction-to-biotensegrity. I have been personally engaged in an exercise-program practice based in biotensegrity here: http://www.evolutionsinstitute.com.
27. The question of liveness in theatrical performance has been the subject of considerable debate; see Auslander 1999.

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